



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Hero on the Margins

Joshua 2:1-4A, 8-15

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I don't normally do this, but I want you to know that if I were to give this sermon to the motion picture association they would likely rate it PG-13 for sexual and violent themes. It's just the nature of this Biblical text. I want you to have that disclaimer so you can prepare in the way you need to prepare. The story is what it is. Joshua's spies enter the city and go directly to Rahab the prostitute. Why is this their first stop? You can figure that out on your own. They "lie" there in the Biblical sense of the word. When word gets out, Rahab makes a deal with the spies to spare her and her family when the rest of the city is murdered. They agree a red cord will mark her household like the blood of the lamb over the doors of the Hebrew people at Passover. So, the ancient Israelites take the land of Canaan and slaughter its inhabitants, but Rahab's life and the lives of her family are spared.

Raise your hand if you can recall another sermon on the story of Rahab and her role in Israel's mission in the land of Canaan.

I, a preacher's kid turned preacher, can think of one and only one sermon I have ever heard about Rahab. Rahab only seems to come up when we are listening to either the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew or the list of the faithful in Hebrews 11. She features there among heroes like Abraham and Moses. How in the world did she make those two very important lists and yet we so rarely tell her story?

Rahab inhabited a triple marginalized body. Woman is the first hit. Canaanite the second. And just to finish off her marginalization, add "prostitute." She is not, in any sense of the word, a conventional hero. She is not the kind of person most folks want to bring up in mixed company. Older interpretations would hypersexualize her and treat her as an object, using her profession to perpetuate the xenophobia within the story that has persisted into modern times. She is also written into a book of the Bible that is not a popular preaching text. Joshua is a story of ancient Israel violently seizing the land of Canaan.

Joshua is full of stories of the people of God murdering in God's name, claiming land they believed was theirs to claim, wiping out the peoples who inhabited the land. It is slaughter in the name of manifest destiny. It is a dangerous text that must be interpreted with the utmost care. This is a case where Biblical literalism has cost countless innocent lives. It is not a text to approach lightly.

Some interpreters note that this text has much in common with the story of Sodom in Genesis 19, another text where Biblical literalism has cost lives. This is perhaps to suggest that Canaan was a land that needed saving from its own wickedness. Does that justify it? Was this a mission to liberate? As a strong believer in Just Peace, as in the peace that comes with justice, not genocide, that doesn't sit well with me. Murder to accomplish liberation? Where does that end? Spoiler alert: it doesn't. Is this an immoral land grab believed to be divinely sanctioned or a divine plan to justify a godforsaken people lost in their own evil? Either is a dangerous line of thought, and either option leaves me with an uneasy ache in the pit of my stomach. I would hope it does yours as well.

This text is not one to be taken lightly. It is not one to approach with anything but a willingness to dig deep, question, and disrupt harmful interpretations.

This text was cited to justify the genocide of the Potawatomi peoples of the land where we now sit, and indigenous people all over this land we call America. That should make our stomachs churn. It is also a source text for the ongoing conflict in the Holy Land that erupted in yet more horrifying, gruesome violence in Israel and Gaza this week. That should also make our stomachs churn.

Israeli citizens have been terrorized, kidnapped, and murdered by Hamas. I cannot bear the descriptions and the videos of kidnapped children. Horrors. 1300 killed. It is indefensible.

Unfortunately, this is not some isolated and random terrorist attack out of nowhere. As many learn about the conflict in Israel and Palestine for the first time this week, there are cries that there is only one story to tell, and that to speak of context is to side with terrorists and be disrespectful to the Israeli lives lost. To speak is to offend. To say nothing is to offend. We are all afraid. But this is too important for Israeli and Palestinian lives and for our shared humanity.

Just prior to the Hamas attack hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens were in the street to decry the Israeli government that acts without regard for human rights or international law. They have been murdering Palestinian children, bulldozing Palestinian homes, occupying Palestinian land, and restricting Palestinian freedoms in a conflict that has now gone on for decades. So many Israelis of good conscience want the peace that will not come by way of more killing of citizens on either side.

But we are often asked to grieve for one side. We are asked to see the story as good v. evil. Black and white. The heroes v. the villains. No nuance. No humanity. No respect for life unless those lives belong to "us" and not to "them."

In a good v. evil, black and white, heroes and villains reading of the Book of Joshua, the Canaanites deserved to lose their homeland and die, didn't they? Or at least their lives were not as valuable as the land, because that was God's promise, right? After all, ancient Israelites had endured slavery in Egypt and had been a weak and underdog tribe without a homeland.

Sure, the Canaanites had families and traditions and celebrated their love, and yes, archaeologists have found evidence of very loving and careful burials of Canaanite loved ones there in Jericho, but they were... Canaanites, right? Well, except for Rahab; I mean, she was different. Not like those other Canaanites. She doesn't count. She's probably glad all her "evil" friends were slaughtered... right?

Either way, this was... God's will, right? Joshua's army was just fulfilling the promise that the oppressed and weary tribe of ancient Israel would have a safe homeland. God must have meant a land that was exclusively theirs with no outsiders to be taken by any means necessary. Right? It's strange that even after slaughtering the Canaanites, ancient Israel never completely found safety and home and peace with their neighbors.

Thousands of years passed and humans all over the world continued to struggle with the complexity of migration and finding home and identity and belonging and with those easy ideas about "us" v. "them," of "heroes" v. "villains." Not so long ago in Europe, a strong "us" v. "them" emerged and led, yet again, to slaughter. The unthinkable. The Holocaust. Jewish people endured horrific suffering, loss, torture, and death. We remember so that we do not allow antisemitism or any hatred of any group to go unchecked. A safe homeland for Jews was to be created. In 1948, Palestine was being colonized by Great Britain and they offered to send Jewish people there. Zionism was a relatively new idea out of Europe that the Jewish people deserved a theocratic and ethnically homogenous nation on the land their ancestors once inhabited. At least these Holocaust survivors would have a safe haven, free of hatred and antisemitism. That land is the land in this text we read today! Where the Canaanites slaughtered. Now there were no Canaanites in the land, but there were these other people there. These folks who would become known as "The Arab Problem." There was a desire for an-all Jewish nation and for more land. It led to violence. It would seem that in some cases, when humans migrate to escape oppression, when they find themselves the "them" in and "us" v. "them," there is a tendency by some, not all, but some, to step right into yet another "us" v. "them." Somehow being "us" feels like the only way to heal after having been "them." It doesn't really heal us, but it feels that way sometimes. It's complicated. It's messy. It's confusing. It gives me an ache in the pit of my stomach. I bet it leaves you feeling uneasy too.

Killing in the name of God is and always has been using God's name in vain. This time, it has been used to the detriment of innocent citizens in Israel and Gaza. Israel, a nation state that was to be a safe haven for the Jewish people after horrific violence, and Palestine, where Muslims, who were colonized, driven from their homes, and now experience Islamophobia all over the world, should both be safe. Here's the thing: none of us are safe if our neighbors are not. None of us will find safety at the expense of our neighbors. We are too interconnected for that. There. is. no. "them." There is only "us."

Now Hamas is reprehensibly and callously murdering Israelis, and the Israeli government has retaliated against Hamas by further cutting off water, food, electricity and medical supplies to Gaza, a place where the Israeli government controls what and who goes in and out, that human rights organizations call the largest open-air prison in the world, where half the population is under 18. 2,300 killed in Gaza. More than 8,700 injured, but hospitals are out of supplies and are running on generators that will eventually run out of fuel. The Israeli government told half of Gaza evacuate because they intend to destroy it, but they are not allowing them to cross the borders, nor are they permitting humanitarian aid in. This, too, is indefensible and reprehensible.

There is real antisemitism in the U.S. right now because there is a lack of nuance and a conflation of discussing the context of this conflict, which involves a government's human rights violations and illegal actions, with criticizing Jews. There is also real Islamophobia and hatred of Palestinians in the US because there is a lack of nuance and a conflation of Hamas and all Muslims and Palestinians. Jewish people are beloved of God. Muslim people are beloved of God. Israelis are beloved of God. Palestinians are beloved of God. Ancient Israelites were beloved of God. And this might disrupt your faith a little, but Canaanites were beloved of God.

You are beloved of God, and as siblings in faith to both our Jewish and Muslim kin, it is our responsibility to speak with nuance, to reject "us" v. "them" thinking and to side not with one group's violence or the other, but with peace; with humanity; with life! Lives depend on our nuance. Stop siding with either Hamas or Israel and side with peace. Our government sends over three billion of our tax dollars a year to Israel. That is more than any other country, and our leaders are calling for more military aid. More weapons have not yet and never will create peace in Israel. Stop seeing a people or a religion as the enemy, and start seeing violence and war and "us" v. "them" thinking as the enemy. Humanize Israeli and Palestinian citizens caught in this violence between an authoritarian government and a violent group of extremists. Call people out when they express their sorrow for only Israelis or only Palestinians. No, we must stop siding with "us" or "them" because there is only us.

With whatever shred of moral authority I may have as a pastor, hear me say that every human being, whether Jewish, Muslim, or otherwise deserves to live without threat of violence. Jewish people in Israel deserve that. Muslims in Gaza deserve that. What Hamas has done is horrific and indefensible, and what the Israeli government has done is horrific and indefensible. To celebrate or condone the actions of either violent side is to lose any moral high ground you may have had. That is why today in the lounge, you are invited to sign compassion cards for Oak Park Temple, Temple Har Zion, and American Muslims for Palestine, which has a large contingent in the Chicagoland area.

Yes, the situation in modern-day Israel and Palestine is as complicated as the one that was happening in that very same place in the ancient text we read today. Two peoples at war over this particular piece of land. That gives me an ache in the pit of my stomach.

But you know what? However sick to her stomach it may have made Rahab, she refused “us” v. “them” thinking. I think it helped that Rahab was an outsider by the standards of both the Canaanites and the ancient Israelites. You get the feeling that she doesn’t come to the story with a particularly strong allegiance to one side or the other. She looks at the situation in her land the way the downstairs servants in Downton Abbey might view a conflict between those in the upstairs house. They are seen as outsiders by the lords and ladies of the house, but they *hear everything*. They know every side of the story, because they are believed so unimportant that people have loose tongues around them. They creep past cracked open doors and listen through walls. They hear everything.

Rahab lived in the city wall. She did not live in the middle of the city where proper people handled proper business. She lived in the in-between place with one ear to what was happening within the city walls and one ear to what was happening without. Her profession meant she was not respected, so people would have had loose tongues around her.

There are Rahabs all around us. They are the in-between people. Their allegiance to “us” or “them” cannot be counted on. They see truth where the more duty-bound among us don’t. They take the path that emerges when others don’t look up from their dusty old maps. Of all the so-called “important” people in her city--politicians and doctors and scholars and lawyers--it is Rahab the prostitute who survives. She turned her back on everyone in her city.

And she will turn her back on us, too, if need be. Rahab does not pledge allegiance to us or to them. She did not pledge allegiance to the land of Canaan or to ancient Israel. She simply listened within the walls to know what God was doing.

Rahab is listening in the walls of our city. As Rev. Anna Carter Florence says, “Rahab is an unseen, listening presence inside the walls of the things we human beings construct in the name of God. Our buildings. Our theologies. Our political platforms. Anything that delineates an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ anything that claims to know who is chosen and who is not, anything that sanctions divine violence as a final solution, is a hollow wall where Rahab needs to be listening—and plotting.”

Rahab may very well be plotting against us. She has heard every side of the story and she knows how to survive. She knows when our allegiance to *our* religion, *our* politics, or *our* nation gets in the way of allegiance to peace; to humanity; to life. She holds no allegiance to those former things. She has heard too much. She knows better.

Rahab’s name literally means broadness. Rahab represents an expansion in every sense of the word. Rahab the prostitute, who even Joshua’s spies must have seen as non-threatening

enough for them to allow her family to survive, becomes an ancestor of both Jews and Christians and a pillar of the faith named in the who's who of heroes in Hebrews 11. Alongside names like Abraham and Moses, we find Rahab, the prostitute living in the walls of the city. She broadens our understanding of who is important to God, of what it means to be chosen by God. She shows us the absurdity of the concept of "us" and "them." She also reminds us to look for the heroes on the margins: the ones who are not like us, the not-so-respectable ones, the ones who won't pledge allegiance to "us" and to our schemes that label people as one of ours or one of them. We need to align ourselves with those heroes who know too much to deal in nonsense allegiances and who have no time for the divisions we have created among ourselves. We need the Rahabs among us, perhaps even for our own survival.

May God bless us with the courage to stand firmly on moral high ground and the humility to remember that regardless of where we think we stand, we are all standing together. We will never know peace apart from each other.

Amen.